

Film and Television Narrative Structure (Butler)

I. "Classical" Hollywood cinema's principles of narration

- A. single protagonist
- B. Exposition establishes characters and space
- C. Central enigma underpins story. [motivation]
- D. Narrative progresses by having an antagonist delay enigma resolution.
- E. Conflict peaks in a climax.
- F. Closure assured in the resolution.

II. TV Series

- A. often multiple protagonists
- B. much less exposition
- C. desire of character that forms motivation for plot shifts from one character to the next each episode

Narrative As a Formal System (Bordwell and Thompson)

I. theme, plot, character--from Aristotle's "Poetics"

- II. narrative is a chain of events in cause-effect relation occurring in time and space
- A. incidents, problems, conflicts; arrive at a final state or new perspective
- B. spectator--anticipates, curious, suspense, surprise, hunches, feels satisfied or cheated
- C. beginning--in medias res; then changes, new situation; then end
- 1. exposition at beginning; good and inferior kinds of exposition
- 2. introducing the situation, characters, tone, major problem or conflict
- D. causality, time--organizing and pacing the "middle"
- 1. parallelism, diff. spaces
- 2. subplots with minor characters

E. PLOT--WHAT'S ON SCREEN; STORY--WHAT WE CAN INFER AS WELL

- 1. the structured material on the sound and image tracks
- 2. how editors manipulate and construct plots
- F. plot can also have in it non-story, non-diegetic material
- 1. we create the story in our mind from cues in the plot
- 2. plot can and must leave out parts of a story or character
- 3. just one or perhaps a few characters developed more fully, others remain only types
- 4. major character's traits, decisions revealed only gradually

G. kinds of plots

- 1. gain in knowledge--search, investigate
- 2. framing situation, narrator looking back
- 3. deadlines, meetings, timetables, journeys, the appointment
- 4. the heterosexual couple

H. ever narrower patterns of development necessary as film passes the midpoint

- 1. arrange cues; dramatic causality seems to make things inevitable
- a. setting up dramatic causality by the rule of threes
- 2. "finger pointing" devices in film at every level of construction

III. character

- A. collection of traits--those necessary for the narrative, and revealed in order that the narrative needs the revelation
- B. we are always hypothesizing causes, always psychologizing
- C. major character--more traits, changes; minor characters--single trait, unchanging. Cause of racial and sexual denigration, also sets up a "little space" in our mind to think about those who are narratively "others."
- D. individ characters are set up to be the narratives causal agents--their decisions, choices, traits cause something which then shapes the flow or outcome of the narrative
- E. desire=goal; opposition=thwarting, conflict, obstacle; all drama is based on conflict; conflict and contradictions are the locus of movement and change

F. predominance of psychological causes, motivations

G. love and romance as motif, family for tv

IV. omniscient or restricted narration

- A. always something we are not told
- B. unobtrusive shifting from character to character's viewpoints
- C. perceptual or mental subjectivity

- 1. usually subjective shots inserted into overall frame of objectivity--bad dream, worst consequence fantasy
- V. depth of the knowledge gained
 - A. how deep into the soul do we probe, how much in depth do we go
 - B. depth of knowledge could be gained from either a restricted or an omniscient narration
- VI. time
 - A. how film time organized, around action's consequences --"highlighting"
 - B. sometimes something is repeated a few times
 - 1. may indicate an habitual action, often seen slightly differently
 - 2. story element seen in different light--a very effective dramatic device
 - C. tv's segmentation and household labor, family time
- VII. genres
 - A. cop show
 - B. soap opera
 - C. western

The Screenplay

- I. anticipation and surprise
 - A. closure
 - 1. patterns, wholes, completeness--the making of any story
 - 2. goal struggled toward
 - 3. clues implanted, stages indicated
 - 4. foreshadowing
 - B. dramatic causality
 - 1. how different from real life
 - 2. rule of threes
 - 3. how coincidence is used
- II. stages
 - A. deep structure
 - B. story -- several paragraphs
 - C. treatment with beats and action in order that it will appear on screen
 - 1. in present tense, in paragraph form, little dialogue or camera instructions, third person, tell how it will be seen on screen
 - D. scene or step outline
 - E. screenplay (form, various drafts)
 - F. shooting script; scene breakdown
- III. Conflict creates both expectation and anxiety about the ending, necessary for dramatic tension
 - A. problem, obstacle, threat, decision, choice, pressure, tension, challenge, imbalance, conflicting values, clash, disharmony, discord
 - B. back and forth motion, actions and reactions
 - C. needed for dramatic action, climax
 - D. deep structure--one sentence, can be about myth or primal conflict, or about characters in conflict
 - E. use of the word "vs."
 - F. find climax to define major conflict--what is being climaxed? whose story is it?
 - G. also conflict with self, with environment, with the uncanny or supernatural
- IV. catharsis and identification
 - A. use of a protagonist, a single individual
 - B. emphasis on strong and painful emotions, on actions that have a clear consequence
 - C. empathy for person with a problem, underdog, heroism
 - D. how to create a good villain
 - E. audience's kinesthetic responses
 - F. convention as source of emotional response--what becomes boring
- V. dramatic structure
 - A. ellipsis
 - B. beats=points where story moves
 - C. dramatic progression and mini-climaxes--constant escalation, both as a whole and within each scene
- D. scene construction
 - 1. odds and obstacles
 - 2. actions, show rather than tell

3. dramatic economy in dialogue
4. use of setting
5. tag business at end of scene
- E. reversals, surprises, and revelations
- F. first and second act climax
- G. beginnings
 1. a problem to solve
 2. a new experience
 3. start with a situation, a premise
 4. win attention
 5. involve the audience emotionally
 6. meet main characters
 7. seeds of the ending
 8. background through exposition
 - a. good and bad exposition
 - b. tell necess. info, especially in Act I
 - c. the "spine"= a two to three paragraph summary
 9. the diegesis or film world
 10. tone, style, atmosphere
- H. middles
 1. change, growth
 2. struggles
 3. characters' goals, strategies--may change via reversal
 4. time indications
 5. intensify expectations, narrow down causality, path of action
 6. thwart answers, incompleteness
 7. ruses, lead viewer astray
 8. subplots
 9. complications
 10. confrontations and squaring off between opposing characters
- I. tag end, denouement, falling action at end